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CAPTAIN CHARLES CORBIT'S CHARGE AT WESTMINSTER

by

James H. Wilson

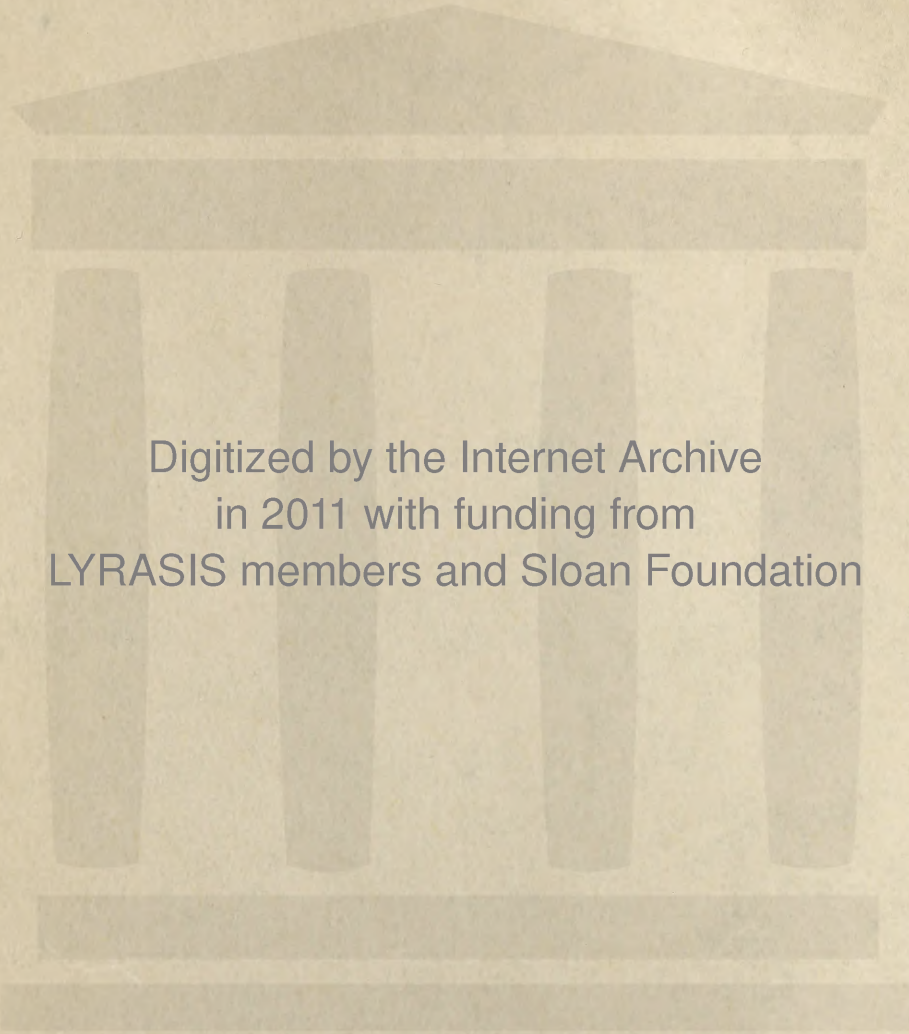












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PAPERS OF THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF DELAWARE.

LXII

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With a Squadron of the First Delaware Cavalry

JUNE 29, 1863

AN EPISODE OF THE GETTYSBURG CAMPAIGN

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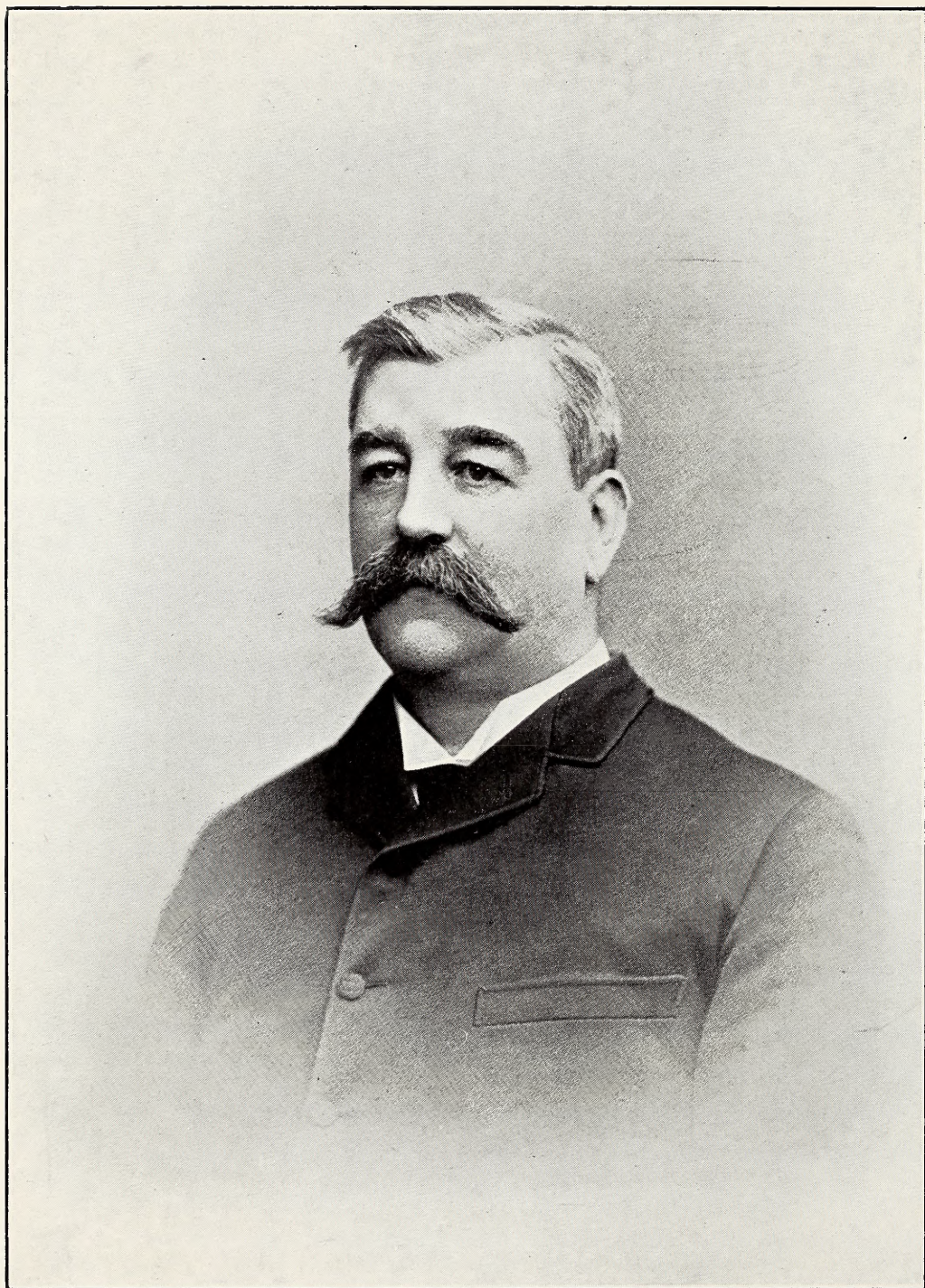












CAPTAIN CHARLES CORBIT



# CAPTAIN CHARLES CORBIT'S CHARGE AT WESTMINSTER

AN EPISODE OF THE GETTYSBURG CAMPAIGN

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BY JAMES H. WILSON,  
*Late Major General U. S. Volunteers.*

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## I.

It is now generally admitted that General Lee after deciding upon the invasion of Pennsylvania in July, 1863, committed a serious strategic mistake in permitting his cavalry commander, the celebrated General J. E. B. Stuart, to cut loose from the army with his three best brigades under Hampton, Fitzhugh Lee and Chambliss. This made a strong column of about 6,000 sabers. Robertson, Jones, Jenkins and Imboden with possibly 6,000 more were kept with Lee's main army; Robertson covering the rear south of the Potomac for several days, while Jenkins and Imboden were covering the advance through the Cumberland valley into Pennsylvania.

The Federal cavalry of three divisions, under Pleasanton, had engaged Stuart with his entire force before he divided it, between Brandy Station and Kelly's Ford. The fighting was conducted with great enthusiasm but some lack of sys-



tem on both sides, and while it resulted in a drawn battle, it greatly encouraged the Federal cavalry. Several writers claim that "it made the Cavalry Corps," Army of the Potomac. Be this as it may, it is certain that on June 18, Pleasanton attacked Stuart's entire force again at Middleburg, driving it back through Upperville to Ashby's Gap. This spirited operation cleared that region of the entire Confederate cavalry and should have taught its over-confident leader that he could not hope to stand against the entire Federal cavalry with half his own force, and yet in a few days he divided it as shown above, into two nearly equal parts. From that day forth, while it cannot be claimed that Pleasanton did the best possible service with his three divisions, it is certain that he handled them far better than Stuart did his. He had the shorter or interior lines and was always in closer contact with Meade's infantry, than Stuart was with Lee's.

It should never be forgotten that Buford's cavalry division passed rapidly to the front, and opened the battle of Gettysburg with great brilliancy and effect from Seminary Ridge, while Kilpatrick's division, after engaging Stuart as will hereafter be shown, passed rapidly across the line of march to the left of the Army of the Potomac, and with the gallant Farnsworth of the Eighth Illinois Cavalry, brought Longstreet's march by the right flank to a timely halt.

Gregg, the imperturbable, was always in his true place, on the right or rear of Meade's advanced line, ready to meet Stuart whenever he might make his appearance, with his three detached brigades of Confederate cavalry.

While there is no sort of doubt that Stuart had permission to cut loose from Lee, it is more than probable that he



neither knew nor explained to Lee just what his own plan of operations would be. It is more than likely that neither had a clear understanding of what might take place for the simple reason that neither could possibly know in advance exactly what would be the movements of the Army of the Potomac or of its cavalry corps. They evidently underrated both the Federal infantry and cavalry, although it is certain that Lee in a general way intended that Stuart in his raid around the Union forces should delay and harass both as much as possible but that whatever else he might do after crossing the Potomac, he should not fail to get into touch with the right of the Confederate columns as they advanced into Pennsylvania. At all events this was what Lee had the reasonable right to expect from his experienced cavalry commander. But certainly Lee with all his confidence in Stuart and all his contempt for Hooker could not have dreamed that Stuart would under any possible contingency of the campaign, remain absent and out of communication with him and his army for nearly a week.<sup>1</sup> While Lee's whole conduct of this campaign was far from faultless as his admirers have claimed it to have been, it is inconceivable that he should have deliberately intended or knowingly consented that Stuart's operations should have been conducted in the reckless and purposeless manner that characterized them throughout the campaign.

## II.

Lee having defeated Hooker decisively at Chancellorsville, May 1-4, conceived the idea of assuming the offensive, routing the Army of the Potomac, possibly capturing Wash-

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<sup>1</sup>See Young's *Battle of Gettysburg*, Harper's, p. 134 et seq.



ington, and certainly, invading Pennsylvania. His hope was that this campaign would in any event result in breaking both the Baltimore and Ohio, and the Pennsylvania railroads, thus severing the direct lines of communication between Washington and the west. This accomplished, with or without another great victory, the Confederate authorities counted confidently on the recognition of the Confederacy by England and France, which in turn would raise the national blockade of the southern coast, and thus enable the Confederates to replenish their military stores, continue the war indefinitely, tire out the national government and finally "gain a triumphant peace." It was a great plan, but it called for the promptest execution and this as the following facts will show it did not get. The Confederate resources were unequal to the task both in generalship and in military supplies.

Lee after Chancellorsville rested nearly a month, beginning his new campaign on June 3. With varying fortunes he maneuvered Hooker, between June 7 and June 15, back to the neighborhood of Washington, where he dropped him, and then turned his columns into the Shenandoah valley, one corps crossing the Potomac at Shepherdstown and two at Williamsport, about 140 miles northwest of the national capital, June 23-25. He halted his advance at Chambersburg in the Cumberland valley June 27-28, sending Ewell's corps towards Carlisle, Harrisburg and York.

Hooker, having correctly devined Lee's movement, crossed the Potomac at Edward's Ferry, 80 miles southeast of Williamsport, and directed his movements on Frederick, Maryland. Receiving here certain suggestions from Washington which he regarded as limiting his independence, on



June 28, he asked to be relieved, which was apparently what the Washington authorities wanted for they accepted it the same day and named General Meade as his successor.

This fortunate change was followed without the loss of an hour by a forward movement on converging and interior lines, between Lee with his infantry and Stuart with his cavalry, towards Gettysburg, where the principal roads of the region seemed to concentrate.

The government by its fortifications at Washington, by a call of Pennsylvania and New York Militia, and by the concentration of the Eighth Army Corps under General Schenck, had provided efficiently for the defence of Washington, Baltimore, and the railroads connecting them with Harrisburg and Philadelphia. It necessarily from the start gave special attention to the operations of the Army of the Potomac, upon which so much depended.

Meanwhile, Lee having discovered through his scouts, Meade's assignment and the prompt advance of the Army of the Potomac, made all possible haste to gather in his scattered detachments and to concentrate his army at Cashtown in the eastern foothills of the South Mountain range, less than a day's march from Gettysburg.

### III.

This was the critical situation in the closing days of June and the opening days of July, 1863. Lee was in the centre of southeastern Pennsylvania with an army of 65,600 infantry and 248 guns; 10,000 cavalry and 50 guns—total 75,600 men and 357 guns.

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<sup>1</sup>The Story of the Civil War, by Colonel Livermore, Putnam's, Part II, pp. 413, 414.



Meade opposed him with seven corps of infantry and one of cavalry, 82,200 infantry, 13,900 cavalry—total 96,100 men and 357 guns.

Both sides had put forth their utmost strength. Every loyal state had done its best, and most of them were fully represented in every army corps, and in all branches of the service. The eyes of the nation were on them all. Delaware was represented by her First Infantry under Colonel Thomas A. Smyth, and her Second Infantry under Colonel William Bailey, both of which were in the fighting Second Corps at the very vortex of the battle near the Bloody Angle.

The state had early in the war endeavored to organize the First Delaware Cavalry for three years, but had been only partly successful. Seven troops, or companies, nominally under Colonel Fisher, had been raised and mustered into the U. S. service, but they were afterwards consolidated into four. Of these two troops, C and D under Captain Charles Corbit and Lieutenant Caleb Churchman, respectively, took the field, under Major Napoleon B. Knight, as ordered by General Schenck. In a campaign where every man counted and every hour was of the utmost importance the part played by any single organization, great or small, may have exerted a vital influence, especially if it caused confusion or delay in any detached or important division of the enemy's forces.<sup>1</sup>

As it will be shown further on, the spirited action of Captain Corbit and his squadron of 130 men at Westminster, on

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<sup>1</sup>By reference to the appendix it will be seen that Delaware furnished to the United States in the War for the Union, a grand total of 9,128 officers and enlisted men.



June 29, constituted an episode of this sort, which deserves a more conspicuous place in the annals of the state and of the United States than has as yet been assigned to it. This will be better understood when the character and the services of Captain Corbit have been as fully set forth as the recollections and reports of his contemporaries will permit.

Charles Corbit was at the outbreak of the War between the States in the full maturity of his young manhood. He was in his 25th year, nearly six feet tall, strong, vigorous, broad shouldered, long armed and deep chested. He was in every way an ideal volunteer soldier. His earlier ancestors came to England with William the Conqueror, and his later ones to Pennsylvania with William Penn. They were from the first serious, self-respecting people, connected by marriage with the best families of England, Pennsylvania and Delaware. Although in later generations they were Quakers, they were never afraid to risk life, fortune and liberty in the cause of human right.

But the modesty of that sect as well as its hatred of battle and war has always had a controlling influence in keeping them silent on their own performances in that line.

In the ante war days it was customary for the leading men of Delaware, especially the rich farmers, professional men and yeomanry to take an interest in the militia. Two troops of cavalry or dragoons were organized and maintained for several years in New Castle county. The first was commanded by Captain John W. Andrews, afterwards colonel of the First Delaware Infantry. The second was organized by Charles Corbit and William Henry Reybold some time before the war, from the neighborhood farmers in the lower part of the county. It afterwards formed the



nucleus of Troop C, First Delaware Cavalry. So, it may be properly said that the little state, then the smallest in the Union in both population and wealth, was in a measure fairly prepared to meet any emergency demand that might be made upon it in behalf of the general government. Slavery had but a small hold within it, and while a few of its public men were more or less in sympathy with this as an inherited institution, none of them took an active part in or gave serious thought to an effort to carry the state into actual rebellion. The most they strove for at any time seems to have been to see that all national measures against secession were taken in strict accord with the requirements of the Constitution of the United States, in regard to the organization and maintainance of armies for the suppression of insurrection.

As a matter of fact, Delaware, like the rest of the border states, was firmly opposed to the war and did what she could to prevent it, but when it actually broke out her Union men made haste to respond to the President's calls, in turn, first for three months' men, then for three years' men, and finally for one year, nine months, three months, and thirty day men.

The Southern sympathizers remained mostly at home. Captain Andrews took the leading part in organizing the First Delaware Infantry and became its Lieutenant Colonel, under Colonel Lockwood, an old West Pointer, then a professor at the Naval Academy and long absent from the state. On its reorganization for three years, Andrews became its Colonel, vice Lockwood promoted.

Having attended a military school with Meade and Kearney before they went to West Point, Andrews's regiment



soon became famous as one of the best in the volunteer army for drill, discipline and efficiency. It was followed (as a three months' regiment) by the Second Delaware Infantry under Colonel William P. Bailey, the Third, under Colonel William O. Redden, the Fourth under Colonel A. H. Grimshaw. There were besides Nields' battery of light artillery and Ahl's battery of heavy artillery, all for three years. It also organized two regiments of nine months' men and mobilized its militia whenever called upon to do so. Altogether from first to last it put under arms for the Union, 9,128 officers and men. This for a state with but a single congressional district, and a population of 112,216, of which 21,627 were colored and only 90, 589 were white was doing well. As over half of these were females, it leaves about 45,000 white males of all ages. From these figures it will be seen that the state sent one man out of every five white males in the state to fight for the Union. It is believed that no heavier percentage was contributed by any congressional district in the north.

Shortly after answering the first call for three years' men Delaware began the organization of the First Delaware Cavalry under George P. Fisher, who was to be its Colonel. He offered the Lieutenant Coloneley to the writer, but this was declined, principally because the War Department would not permit the detachment of regular engineer officers for less than a Coloneley of Volunteers. The undertaking, however, overtaxed her resources and although she did her best she succeeded in getting into service only seven companies, which were finally consolidated into four under the nominal command of Major Napoleon B. Knight.

What follows has principally to do with Company C, un-



der Captain Charles Corbit, three officers and 82 men, and Company D, under First Lieutenant Caleb Churchman, one officer and 43 men or a total of four officers and 130 enlisted men. In the campaign of Gettysburg they were nominally under Major Knight with Lieutenant William W. Lobdell, acting adjutant, but in the sharp affair at Westminster in which they took such a creditable part, they were actually commanded by Captain Charles Corbit, till he was captured.

#### IV.

From the earliest days of the war the Delaware Infantry, especially the first and second regiments, took a prominent part in the operations of the Union forces in Virginia. They both finally became attached to the Second Army Corps, with which they served most creditably to the end.

But the cavalry organization languished from the start, and it was not till the Gettysburg campaign that it got an opportunity to distinguish itself in action against the enemy. It formed a part of the Eighth Army Corps under Major General Schenck, who was charged with the defence of the railroads from Philadelphia to Washington with headquarters at Baltimore. His forces were not only heterogeneous, but scattered all the way from Harper's Ferry to Wilmington. They amounted to nearly 50,000 men of all arms, present and absent, about one-half of whom were actually with the colors. But instead of being massed in front of Baltimore, the principal city of the region, they were scattered under the "pepper box strategy" of Halleck, then commander in chief, into detachments nowhere strong enough to take a vigorous offensive or to effectually support Meade's veterans of the Army of the Potomac as they



advanced to attack Lee's invading columns. The simple fact is that both the Washington government and the people of the neighboring states were more or less surprised by the turn the war had taken, and were far from ready to act with coherence or vigor. Their main dependence was upon the Army of the Potomac, which had not yet recovered from the depressing effect of the disastrous and disgraceful defeat of Chancellorsville. It was, however, a coherent, aggressive, well organized and well officered army, free from the pernicious idea of defending particular places or limited areas, and was above all ready and willing to follow and fight the enemy wherever he might be found. In doing this, under the gallant and patriotic Meade, who acted from the first minute after assuming actual command on the morning of June 28, with admirable promptitude, vigor and certainty, it had the defensive co-operation of Schenck with the Eighth Army Corps from the south, and of Couch with the militia of Pennsylvania and New York, from the north and east. But, strange as it may seem, the most aggressive and effective help it received in the actual campaign, from the outside was from Captain Corbit and his handful of Delaware cavalry, in the spirited affair at Westminster on the 29th of June.

In order that this may be properly understood, it should be remembered that the theatre in which the opposing armies were operating was a quadrilateral of, say, 60 by 80 miles limited on the south by the Baltimore and Ohio railroad from Baltimore to the west, on the east by the Northern Central, from Baltimore to Harrisburg, on the north by the Pennsylvania from Philadelphia to the west and on the west



by the parallel ranges of the Blue Ridge between which Lee was marching with his invading army.

Westminster was at that time a small country town in Maryland near the line between Maryland and Pennsylvania at the western end of the Western Maryland, then serving as a branch to the Northern Central railway. This branch projected into the quadrilateral nearly half way to Gettysburg. Westminster at its outer end was connected by good roads with both Washington and Baltimore and these with the branch railroad, caused it to be made a field depot of supplies or a secondary base for the Army of the Potomac. It lies nearly 45 miles due north of Washington, about 25 miles northwest of Baltimore and something like 30 miles from Gettysburg, all as the crow flies. If fifteen per cent. be added to these figures for road curvature it will give a close approximation to the actual distances.

After Stuart with his three brigades crossed the Potomac, his route lay through Rockville, Brookville, Cookeville, Hood's Mill and Warfield to Westminster. On the way he captured a few wagon trains and their guards which served more to embarrass and delay him than to give him any substantial advantage. He skirmished at Rockville with Colonel Lowell's Second Massachusetts Cavalry, covering Washington, but none of these minor operations did any material injury to Meade's army or caused it the slightest delay, and but little anxiety.

Westminster was, however, the nearest railway terminus to his general line of march, and as it had direct railway connection with Baltimore and roundabout connection with Washington, it was of sufficient importance to cause Schenck to put it under the guardianship of the Delaware



cavalry, and Meade to direct the Sixth Corps not only to march through it, but to take it under temporary charge.

As Buford's cavalry division was to cover Meade's advance, while Gregg's and Kilpatrick's were marching parallel with and covering his right or eastern flank, it is evident that Stuart's route lay through dangerous country, but there is nothing in his report to show that he had any adequate appreciation of the perils that beset him. From all accounts, especially his own, it is evident that the most he had in his mind was to pass through Westminster on his northward march to Hanover, York and Carlisle, and possibly to Harrisburg, in search of Lee's army, from which he had been separated for nearly a week. It is entirely clear that neither Stuart knew where Lee was, nor Lee where Stuart was. It is just as clear that both Meade's infantry and cavalry were between Lee and his cavalry, and that neither Lee nor Stuart knew the exact movements or plans of the other.

It was under these conditions that Stuart's advance, marching northward on the Washington-Westminster road reached the vicinity of Westminster, June 29, between 4 and 5 p. m. Fortunately Major Knight with one troop and a half or "95 men," as he states it, had reached the town from Baltimore on the 28th at 11 a. m., and after sending out scouts on all the roads without discovering any trace of the enemy, went into camp in the suburbs, on the road to Gettysburg about 30 miles away. That evening at 9 o'clock it was reported that the enemy had made his appearance at the outposts, but it turned out to be a false alarm. On the 29th, the pickets still reporting all quiet at the outposts, Knight gave orders to the squadron commander to have his



barefooted horses reshod. Meanwhile he went himself, it is said, to the local tavern where he was refreshing himself, when at 3.30 a citizen came in and reported the enemy "as approaching in force on the Washington road," the pickets having been captured. This news came as a surprise, which it can be well understood, was followed by a few minutes of excitement, but not much uncertainty. The gallant Corbit, with the true instincts of a soldier, sounded "to horse," without a moment's delay, and followed this in turn by the formation of his little squadron, reduced by outposts "to about 70" men, every one of whom promptly found his proper place in ranks. Taking the main street instantly in the direction of the alarm, Corbit, passing the tavern en route, paused only long enough to report the presence of his command and to ask for orders. These came promptly enough from Major Knight, to move at once against the enemy, but for the reason that the Major himself had in the earlier days of the war been enrolled in the Confederate service, it is said he was afraid of being captured and thereupon failed to put in his appearance or to take the command that his rank and responsibility made obligatory upon him. Corbit, however, like the true soldier his ancestry and breeding made him, proved equal to the occasion. Taking the trot to the front, he and his gallant, but untried followers soon found themselves in sight of the hostile forces coming towards the town, and careless of whether it was a mere detachment or Stuart's whole division, of whose actual presence he was still entirely ignorant, he shouted "Draw sabres!" and dashing to the front, sounded the charge, throwing himself and his gallant followers furiously, head on, against the astonished enemy.



The daring and the shock of this movement were not only surprising, but overwhelming to the enemy. It necessarily overthrew his head of column which it is said had already been massed at a turn of the road, and compelled it to recoil and to reform under cover of the oncoming reinforcements. Indeed there was nothing else for it to do, but old and experienced cavalymen such as Stuart, Fitz Lee and Hampton, found this a simple operation requiring but a few minutes.

In the spirited *melée* which resulted, the enemy soon checked Corbit, and by a pistol shot killed his horse while it was throwing up its head under pressure of the rein and thus fortunately covering its rider behind. Corbit necessarily went down with his charger, and was captured pistol in hand, while standing astride of his dead horse.

His men put up the best fight they could but were soon scattered and about half of them were taken prisoners. The same fate overtook Lieutenant Churchman and his men, who covered the rear, while the remnant of the fighting force, preceded by Major Knight withdrew by the Baltimore road to Reistertown. Churchman was also captured, but Knight and Lobdell continued their retreat after the pursuit had ceased. Knight was the first to reach Schenck's headquarters at Baltimore. He was also the first and only officer to make an official report, and this report dated June 30, General Schenck forwarded at once to Washington, where it duly found its way into "The Official Records" as published by the War Department years afterwards.<sup>1</sup>

While this report mentions favorably Lieutenant D. W. C. Clark "with an advanced guard of 12 men" from Company

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<sup>1</sup>Official Records, Serial Number 44 p. 201, et seq.



C, and Lieutenant Reedy and "some 7 or 8 men" of the same company, rather unfavorably, it leaves the details of the whole affair somewhat uncertain. It characterizes Captain Corbit's conduct as "gallant and masterly," and praises the men as "fighting all the time with the greatest bravery and determination—contending hotly for every inch of ground." It praised Lieutenant Churchman and his company as protecting and covering the retreat in "splendid style, losing all but seven of his men and falling himself into the hands of the enemy." Finally it mentions a small detachment of the First Connecticut Cavalry which they came across at Reistertown. Ordering it to assist Lieutenant Reedy in rallying the men of his own command, Knight proceeded into Baltimore in pursuance of an order he claimed to have received on the way, from the Department Commander. He gives his "casualties and losses" in the fight and retreat as

"Two commissioned officers—Captain Charles Corbit and Lieutenant Caleb Churchman; the former of whom fell while gallantly charging the enemy, and is now a prisoner in their hands, and the latter was captured while covering the retreat of the main body."

He also lost

"One wagon laden with hospital stores, camp and garrison equipage" and "the regimental books and papers."

How many men escaped capture he fails to tell, but judging from the somewhat uncertain strength of the command it is likely that between 50 and 60 men escaped finally, while Corbit and the men taken with him, were irregularly paroled and released by Stuart in person, the next day near Hanover, after an informal conference in which he cordially



commended their gallantry and told them "they ought to be fighting for the Confederacy rather than against it."

In closing this report Major Knight calls special

"Attention to the bravery and intrepidity of the officers and men whose efficiency and determination of purpose has saved us from utter annihilation."

This constitutes the whole story so far as the Union records give it, but how much of this rests upon Major Knight's personal observations, and how much of it on that of others, remains in doubt, which cannot be fully determined at this late date. It is certain that neither Corbit nor Churchman, Lobdell nor Clark made any written report, and although several of them were, as already stated, paroled and released the next day, their personal experiences and observations in the action and afterwards, rest almost entirely upon tradition, to which further reference will be made in the conclusion of this paper.

## V.

Fortunately Stuart, submitted to Lee's Adjutant General, August 20, 1863, a full report<sup>1</sup> of all the operations of his cavalry division from June 16 to July 24, of that year, and while this report is somewhat vainglorious in tone, it gives many interesting details. Referring as he says, to his desire "To acquaint the Commanding General with the nature of the enemy's movements as well as to place with his column my cavalry force," he adds "the head of the column following a ridge road reached Westminster about 5 p. m. At this place, our advance was obstinately disputed for a short time by a squadron of the First Delaware Cavalry, but what were not killed were either captured or saved themselves by a precipitate flight. In this brief engagement two officers of

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<sup>1</sup>Official Records, Serial Number 44, pp. 687-700.



the Fourth Virginia Cavalry, Lieutenant Pierce Gibson and John W. Murray, were killed. Gallant and meritorious, they were noble sacrifices to the cause. The ladies of the place begged to be allowed to superintend their interment, and in accordance with their wishes the bodies of these young heroes were left in their charge."

It should here be noted that the original of this report contained an endorsement made by General Lee, directing that the preceding sentence should be omitted if the report should be published. It then proceeds as follows:

"The fugitives were pursued a long distance on the Baltimore road and I afterwards heard, created a great panic in that city, impressing the authorities with the belief that we were just at their heels."

But at this place the report grows somewhat confused.

"Here [evidently meaning Westminster and not the end of the pursuit] for the first time since leaving Rector's cross roads [in Virginia] we obtained a full supply of forage, but the delay and difficulty of gathering it kept many of the men up all night. Several flags and one piece of artillery without a carriage were captured here. The latter was spiked and left behind. We encamped for the night a few miles beyond the town, Fitz Lee's brigade in advance, halting the head at Union Mills midway between Westminster and Littlestown on the Gettysburg road. It was ascertained here that night by scouts that the enemy's cavalry had reached Littlestown during the night and encamped."

As the fight at Westminster took place about 5 o'clock in the afternoon, and the command began gathering forage at that place where "many of the men were kept up all night," it is difficult to see how the command could have been united in camp at Union Mills, five or six miles beyond Winchester. The probability is that it encamped in various fields on the roadside and was more or less spread out between the two places, with its advanced guard at Union Mills and its rear guard at Westminster. It is evident at all events that it



was not moving rapidly but just how long it was actually delayed by the fight at or in the vicinity of Westminster or by the necessity for foraging, is a matter of conjecture, but several of the officers and many of the Delaware cavalrymen, claim that Stuart lost at Westminster or near it from ten to twelve hours, or to be more precise from five or six o'clock when they halted that afternoon, till four or five o'clock the next morning when they resumed the march. Of course this was in the night and half of it at least was necessary for rest and sleep for both men and horses, though if they had pushed on till even nine or ten o'clock, fifteen to twenty miles more might have been easily covered before they went into bivouac.

Both Union Mills and Littlestown are on the direct road from Westminster to Gettysburg, and as Littlestown was found already occupied by the Federal cavalry, Stuart early next morning, June 30, resumed his march by a cross road, leading northeastwardly to Hanover. Fitz Lee's brigade marched farther to the left by an intermediate road. Stuart's rear guard, which had bivouacked in the edge of Westminster, was driven out by Gregg's advance at daylight. At 10 a. m. Stuart's head of column reached Hanover but found the place as well as the east and west road, occupied by a column of Federal cavalry moving to the west. This was doubtless Kilpatrick's division. A sharp fight ensued in which Stuart claims to have gained the advantage at first—but admits that his attacking brigade was repulsed "and closely followed by the enemy's fresh troops."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Official Records, Serial Number 44, Stuart's report, p. 695.



As Gregg was in close pursuit through Westminster from the south, Stuart's position was clearly becoming one of increasing peril. Much heavy skirmishing took place, in which Colonel Paine, of the Fourth Virginia Cavalry, was captured by the Federals, and one of Kilpatrick's aids-de-camp was captured by the Confederates. But the significant fact is that Stuart lost another whole day in futile and inconclusive skirmishing, and found himself so pressed at night that he was compelled to turn again to the northeast through Jefferson to the neighborhood of York, about thirty miles east by north from Gettysburg. He admits that his prisoners and wagon trains together with a shortage of ammunition were now embarrassing him and supposing that Lee had already reached the Susquehanna, he contends that his eccentric movement, away from Lee's army rather than towards it, was the proper one for him to make. But the simple facts are again, that he did not know where Lee was, and that both Kilpatrick and Gregg now made it dangerous for him to take the direct road towards Lee's army.

A moment's inspection of a map of the theatre of operations will show that the Federal cavalry held the shorter lines on Stuart, who, as has been seen, had been delayed materially by Captain Corbit's magnificent charge at Westminster, which in turn caused Stuart to reach Hanover too late to cross the road, or to turn to the west on it towards Gettysburg, ahead of Kilpatrick's column marching from York to the west for the purpose of crossing Meade's front and taking his position on the left of Meade's army.

This was the fatal consequence of Lee's mistake in permitting Stuart's detachment to the south and eastward of Meade's army, and of Stuart's equally fatal mistake in per-



mitting himself to be delayed in his march after once starting on it, first by Lowell at Rockville, second by Corbit at Westminster, third by the Union pickets at Littlestown, fourth by Kilpatrick in front at Hanover and fifth by Gregg's pressing on his rear from Westminster. In other words he was wasting time in minor operations that could not possibly help Lee nor materially injure Meade, instead of pushing on night and day till he had found and formed a junction with Lee's army.

But this was not the worst of it, for after wasting an entire day with Kilpatrick at Hanover, he again turned to the right with Fitz Lee in front and Hampton covering his rear. Marching all night to the northeast through Jefferson to the suburbs of York, into which Fitz Lee's battery "tossed a few shells," he pushed on with his main body to the northwest, reaching Dover on the morning of July 1. Failing to find Early's command, which had already passed westward in the direction of Shippensburg, he halted at Dover a few hours to rest and feed, and then took the road again for Carlisle some fifteen miles further to the northwest and thirty-six from York. Here he learned that Ewell had also withdrawn towards Gettysburg, notwithstanding which he wasted the whole of July 1 in "demonstrations," "burning the cavalry barracks," and in making demands "for the surrender of the place." In his report he declared:

"The whereabouts of our army was still a mystery, but during the night I received a despatch from General Lee, in answer to one sent by Major Venable from Dover on Early's trail, that the army was at Gettysburg and had been engaged on this day, July 1, with the enemy's advance."

Stuart was at this time some thirty-six miles nearly due north from Gettysburg with his command badly strung out



but through no merit of his own there was nothing left to prevent him from concentrating it on Lee's rear or left which was closest to his main column. Starting in person that night he reported to Lee on July 2, at exactly what hour does not appear, but he says it "was just in time to thwart a movement of the enemy's cavalry by way of Hunterstown" on the direct road from Gettysburg to York. At just what hour this was it is also hard to determine, but it must have been well on towards sundown as he made his headquarters that night on the York and Heidlersburg road, some five miles northeast of Gettysburg.

It is conceded by all Confederate writers that Stuart did not know where Lee was till some time during the night of July 1-2, at which time he was nearly 30 miles north or northeast of the main body of Lee's army.

To any one who follows this narrative with attention it will be evident that from the time Stuart left Hanover about 12 miles east of Gettysburg on the night of June 30, his march carried him farther and farther away from his true destination, till he reached Carlisle on the morning of July 2. In other words, his initial delay at Westminster was followed by further lost time of at least thirty-six hours, at the end of which he was still 30 miles from Lee and this distance it took him at least twelve hours more to cover.

During this period it should be noted that the whole of Meade's cavalry rejoined him on or near the field of battle, and in close supporting distance, ready to perform the parts assigned to them and especially to meet Stuart whenever he should make his appearance. This is made perfectly clear by Stuart's formal report from which I have quoted whenever necessary to support this narrative. But it is fair to



add that Stuart in its concluding passages strives hard to show that his operations were everywhere successful, that he was fully justified in all his movements, and that Early on leaving York, should have taken measures to acquaint him with his destination, thus saving him "the long and tedious march to Carlisle and thence back to Gettysburg."<sup>1</sup>

It should also be stated that Colonel Mosby, in his spirited work on "Stuart's Cavalry in the Gettysburg Campaign," contends that Stuart made no mistakes. He scarcely mentions Westminster, except as one of Meade's important sub-bases of supply. He does not allude to the affair at that place but in a private letter to the writer, dated May 12, 1913, he claims without going into details that Corbit's charge at Westminster "did not delay Stuart's column one minute" nor in any way change Stuart's plan of operations.

All this, however, is effectively controverted by the simple fact that at daylight of July 1, Stuart crossed the road on which Early and his division twelve hours before had marched towards Gettysburg. It is evident that if Stuart had followed him instead of keeping on his way northward towards Carlisle he could have easily rejoined Lee by 2 p. m. of that momentous day, and coming in upon the broken right flank of Meade's army he might "have assured a victory for Lee that evening."<sup>2</sup>

## VI.

Having given all the light afforded by the Official Records on the effective charge of the Delaware cavalry at West-

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<sup>1</sup>Official Records, Serial Number 44, p. 708, et seq.

<sup>2</sup>"Battle of Gettysburg," Jesse Bowman Young, Harper's, p. 134, et seq.



minster and its probable consequences both direct and indirect, it is now in order to collate the newspaper references and traditions in regard to that affair and to point out so far as possible their relations to the established facts of the case.

It is settled beyond a doubt that Corbit acted mainly on his own responsibility with the greatest personal intrepidity, and that in the *melée* which followed the little band of less than 100 officers and men who followed him, behaved with extraordinary spirit till overwhelmed and captured or driven from the field by the leading troops of Stuart's column. That this conclusion was inevitable when the relative numbers engaged are considered can be admitted without the slightest reflection on the officers or men of the Union side, and it is not strange that no one at the time foresaw the great consequences which might follow such an unexpected and relatively insignificant affair.

Adjutant William W. Lobdell under date of June 27, 1913, in reply to a letter of inquiry from the writer, enclosed a clipping from *The New York Sun*, and also a letter dated August 14, 1912, from O. V. Anderson, formerly first sergeant of Company K, Fourth Virginia Cavalry. The latter writes that he and several of his comrades had recently spent the night together discussing their former campaigns, and with the aid of several letters from former companions and from the clerk of the court at Westminster, agreed substantially as follows: Our advanced guard on the Baltimore pike "got to Westminster about 4 p. m.," and became engaged with your command at once. Our company led the charge into Westminster supported by the balance of the Fourth Virginia. A regiment was dismounted to the right



of the road, and one to the left, but we had broken your command before "these dismounted men got into the engagement," which "took place [from] 5 to 6 p. m.," and "lasted only a few minutes but they were hot ones."

"Your command fought like Turks, killing a goodly number of our best men, [but strange to say] our company, which was in front, lost none. Companies C and D, which came to our relief, lost several good officers and some men. After the fight they halted to feed their horses and draw rations, and then started on a night march towards Carlisle."

Commenting on this letter, Captain Lobdell says:

"My recollection as to the time the fight occurred does not agree with Mr. Anderson's. [I should say] it occurred between one and two o'clock of the afternoon. The troops we engaged were the advance of Stuart's cavalry, who were charging down the main street of Westminster, which at that time was a continuation of the Baltimore pike. How many there were I have no means of knowing, but there were several platoons of them, who as our boys with Captain Corbit in command came charging down upon them turned tail and ran as fast as they could to the main body of the Confederate troops—coming up the Washington road, which was at right angles with the Baltimore pike. Our troop which [had been] sent out as a scouting party consisted of Company C, under Captain Corbit, and part of Company D, under Lieutenant Churchman. They were under [the battalion commander] Major Knight, but as he was taken sick at the hotel the day of the fight, the actual command devolved upon Corbit, who was then the ranking captain. I was just behind Captain Corbit when his horse—a fine black charger—was killed under him [by a shot through the head] undoubtedly saving his life as the shot would otherwise have hit him in the breast.

"Our boys were crowded out of the Washington pike by an overwhelming force, some escaping . . . and some being taken prisoners, among whom were Captain Corbit and Lieutenant Churchman.

"I was forced into a barnyard . . . at the intersection of the Baltimore and Washington pikes, and by run-



ning and jumping, my horse being part thoroughbred . . . I escaped down the Baltimore pike and finally reached Reistertown from which station I was sent to Baltimore that night with a report of the engagement to General Schenck."

On the death of Captain Corbit, which occurred at his country place, "Brookfield," December 29, 1887, a local correspondent sent, December 31, a letter to *The New York Sun* from which the following extracts are taken:

"The late Captain Charles Corbit was buried at Odessa this afternoon. He was the man who perhaps changed the results of the battle of Gettysburg by delaying General Jeb Stuart's cavalry twenty-four hours at Westminster, Maryland, thus preventing him getting to Lee in time to be of service."

The foregoing statement, it should be observed, is not directly supported by the official reports hitherto referred to, but it is a reasonable inference more or less certainly supported by the facts as related herein.

The letter continues:

"Charles Corbit in June, 1863, was only twenty-five years of age. He was captain of Company C, which was [at first] employed to guard the telegraph line through this peninsula. Their duty was to keep open communication by wire between Fortress Monroe and the north and [as yet] they had never smelt gunpowder. On June 28, Corbit's company and a part of Company D in charge of Lieutenant Caleb Churchman were ordered to Westminster about thirty miles southeast of Gettysburg, as an advanced guard of observation. There were ninety-five men and seven officers in the little party . . . commanded by Major Napoleon B. Knight. Small squads . . . were sent out to look for the enemy, who were then marching into Pennsylvania. They found nothing and Knight made himself at home at the Westminster Hotel, leaving Captain Corbit in command of the camp.

"The night of the 28th and the forenoon of the 29th were passed in quiet. In the afternoon at about 3.30 while about thirty of the horses were being shod at a smithy nearby,



word came in that the rebels had appeared. Adjutant Lobdell, now vice-president of the Lobdell Car Wheel Company, . . . was at the hotel. At the first alarm he mounted and started for the camp a quarter of a mile away. As he did so he met Corbit and sixty men coming down the road on a fast gallop.

"They stopped at the hotel for orders but Major Knight was too sick to issue any. The Delaware boys were on the Baltimore road, and along the Washington road . . . at right angles and crossing it a depression in the ground, came Stuart's cavalry. As they rode down to the Baltimore road and turned north they saw the Delaware cavalry dashing towards them down hill. Quickly turning their horses they retreated up the Washington road.

"As line after line turned in the road, on either side of which was a stout fence, they became blocked. The rebel retreat was thus stopped and [at this instant] the sixty Delaware boys dashed with sabers drawn madly into the mass of men and horses. The rebels were cornered and decided to make fight, supposing the whole force of Union cavalry had attacked them.

"The Fourth Virginia Cavalry was ahead said to have been 250 strong, and they dashed towards the Delaware boys with a wild shout. Corbit, who was nearly six feet in height, rose in saddle with uplifted saber and yelled: 'Come on, boys, close up!' As he did so he reined his horse's head high in the air just in time for the animal to receive a ball between the eyes, intended for the master's breast. The charger sank down dead and before his men could close around him the rebels were upon him.

"Then followed a desperate hand to hand struggle with sabers and pistols. The rebel thousands came steadily over the hill and by sheer force of numbers pressed the handful of Delawareans back inch by inch. The road was about eighty feet wide and the sixty Delawareans were jammed in.

"Stuart rapidly deployed his men around the town and unlimbered his artillery so as to command the scene of the contest. In a short time, however, the attacking party was surrounded and nearly all of them captured. A few got away . . . among them Adjutant Lobdell, who had been fighting behind Corbit. Sergeant Clark not only escaped but captured a fine black horse belonging to a rebel. His brother, Lieutenant Clark, escaped with a hole through



his hat and a saber wound in his arm. Those who got away met [that evening] at Reistertown, and when the roll was called on the morning of June 30, twenty-eight men and four officers reported out of one hundred and two. Two had been killed, ten wounded and the rest taken prisoners.

"The Delaware men had no idea what they were doing when they made their wild dash. Stuart afterwards complimented them on their pluck. . . .

"Captain Corbit was paroled at Hanover [the next day] but was afterwards ordered by the government to report for duty and served with the Sixth Corps in Grant's final campaign."

It is said, however, that he 'always felt he had broken his word of honor by returning to the field before his parole had been released.' . . .

"One of the survivors" of the affair at Westminster, "was asked to-day if Corbit fought well? 'Did he fight, well?' was the reply. 'Why damn it, he was the fight!'"

Who was the author of this letter is not known, but it embodies practically all that has ever been claimed for Corbit and his followers, including the direct and roundabout delay which Stuart was then and later forced to make, in order to form a belated junction with Lee and his army.

Other newspapers took most favorable notice of Captain Corbit's gallant feat of arms at Westminster, and of the dismounted service of himself and men with the Sixth Corps, during Grant's campaigns of 1864 and 1865. In appreciation of this loyal service against his own sense of duty the Democratic Governor, Gove Saulsbury, of Delaware, offered him the commission of Lieutenant Colonel, but he declined the honor

"Feeling that if he accepted the promotion it would be a tacit admission that he regarded the action of the government in ordering the disregard of his parole, as right and that his own views of the matter were wrong. It has been well said that it was this rare and delicate sense of honor which stood out most prominently in Corbit and endeared



him to those who knew him intimately. It was this high quality that brought him the unquestioned respect of his neighbors and comrades, and made him 'the ideal soldier' which by common consent, both loyal and disloyal men conceded him to have been."

Finally, it must be admitted by all conscientious investigators, that had it not been for the considerable delay which necessarily followed Captain Corbit's gallant fight at Westminster, whether that delay was two or twelve hours, Stuart could easily have reached Hanover less than thirty miles to the northward, before the Federal cavalry could have barred the road to the west from that point. This accomplished he could have passed on through Hunterstown, to a junction with Lee in a single day's march instead of taking three days, and thus giving effective support to Lee, as Buford, Kilpatrick and Gregg gave theirs to Meade, from the hour the first gun was fired at Gettysburg till the battle was ended.

The important fact of this campaign is that Stuart's detachment was an inexcusable mistake from the start, and grew from bad to worse till it ended in his defeat by Gregg, on Lee's extreme left July 3, 1863, simultaneously with Meade's defeat of Pickett's charge against his left-centre at the "Bloody Angle."

The responsibility for this mistake must be evenly divided in history between Lee, the Confederate Generalissimo, and Stuart, his over-confident chief cavalry commander.



## APPENDIX.

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### DELAWARE'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE UNION ARMY.

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#### THREE YEARS' ORGANIZATIONS.

The First Delaware Infantry, reorganized in September and October, was mustered into the United States service for three years on October 17, 1861, under Colonel John W. Andrews, with 37 officers, 846 men. Total, 883.

Mustered out July 12, 1865, 27 officers, 628 men. Total, 655.

The Second Delaware Infantry was organized in May, June and July, and mustered into the United States service in May, 1861, under Colonel William P. Bailey, with 33 officers, 805 men. Total, 838.

Mustered out June, July, August, September and October, 1865, 12 officers, 160 men. Total, 172.

The Third Delaware Infantry was organized in February, March and April, and mustered into the United States service from February to May, 1862, under Lieutenant Colonel Samuel H. Jenkins, with 30 officers, 780 men. Total, 810.

Mustered out June 3, 1865, 10 officers, 164 men. Total, 174.

The Fourth Delaware was organized in June, July, August and September, and mustered into the service of the United States in the summer of 1862, under Colonel A. H. Grimshaw, with 36 officers, 899 men. Total, 935.



Mustered out June 3, 1865, 16 officers, 258 men. Total, 274.

Captain Benjamin Nields' Company of Light Artillery was organized in July, and mustered into the service of the United States, August 20, 1862, for three years, with 3 officers, 141 men. Total, 144.

Mustered out June 23, 1865, 5 officers, 123 men. Total, 128.

Captain George W. Ahl's Heavy Artillery was organized and mustered into service July 27, 1863, with 5 officers, 147 men. Total, 152.

Mustered out July 25, 1865, 4 officers, 129 men. Total, 133.

The First Delaware Cavalry was organized in January, February and May, 1862, and was mustered into the service of the United States under Colonel George P. Fisher, with 24 officers, 544 men. Total, 568.

Mustered out June 30, 1865, 11 officers, 352 men. Total, 363.

Total three years' men, 4,330.

#### ONE YEAR ORGANIZATION.

The First Battalion, Eighth Delaware Infantry, was organized and mustered into the service of the United States, October, 1864, for one year, with 9 officers, 283 men. Total, 292.

Mustered out June 5, 1865, 4 officers, 187 men. Total, 191.

#### NINE MONTHS' ORGANIZATIONS.

The Fifth Infantry, H. S. McComb, Colonel, was organized in October and November, 1862, and mustered into the



United States service in those months, with 37 officers, 878 men. Total, 915.

Mustered out August, 1863, 39 officers, 853 men. Total, 892.

The Sixth Infantry, for special duty in the state, was mustered into the United States service for nine months in October and November, 1862, under Colonel Edwin Wilmer, with 36 officers, 837 men. Total, 873.

Mustered out August, 1863, 38 officers, 836 men. Total, 874.

Total nine months' men, 1,788.

#### THREE MONTHS' ORGANIZATIONS.

The First Delaware Infantry was organized and mustered into the United States service, May 22, 1861, for three months under Colonel Henry H. Lockwood, with 37 officers, 742 men. Total, 779.

Mustered out August 17, 1861, 38 officers, 741 men. Total, 779.

(This was the first regiment raised by Delaware. It became in point of time the second three years' regiment furnished by the state, but always retained its first title.)

Captain Thomas Crossley's half company of artillery was mustered into the United States service in July, 1862, with 1 officer, 49 men. Total, 50.

Mustered out September 30, 1863, 1 officer, 38 men. Total, 39.

Total three months' men, 829.

#### ONE HUNDRED DAYS' ORGANIZATIONS.

The Ninth Infantry was organized and mustered into the service of the United States for 100 days in September and



October, 1864, under Lieutenant Colonel Charles Bird, with 27 officers, 684 men. Total, 711.

Mustered out January 23, 1865, 24 officers, 642 men. Total, 666.

#### THIRTY DAYS' ORGANIZATIONS.

The Seventh Infantry was organized and mustered into the service of the United States, under Colonel E. Hounsfeld, in July, 1864, with 33 officers, 945 men. Total, 978.

Mustered out August 12, 1864, 33 officers, 946 men. Total, 979.

Captain Robert Milligan's independent company of cavalry was mustered into the United States service, July 17, 1864, for thirty days, with 3 officers and 88 men. Total, 91.

Mustered out August 15, 1864, 3 officers, 87 men. Total, 90.

Total thirty days' men, 1,069.

Grand total of all troops mustered into the service of the United States in the war for the union, 9,128.

Total mustered out, 6,276.

These figures take no account of recruits, conscripts, transfers, consolidations, desertions, dead of disease, killed, wounded or missing.



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Captain Charles Corbit's charge at Westminster with a squadron of the First Delaware cavalry, June 29, 1863



